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SWP Comment

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The Visegrád Group's Policy towards Israel

Common Values and Interests as a Catalyst for Cooperation

Joanna Dyduch

Since 2017, relations between the Visegrád Group (V4) and Israel have been changing. Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia are increasingly developing shared views and values on international politics and show a greater willingness to cooperate economically. This coincides with growing European Union (EU) criticism of the Israeli government's stance on the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, the V4 states' leaders do not necessarily share that criticism, and they have even aligned themselves with Israeli viewpoints on issues such as migration, security, and threat perceptions, all of which are disputed in the EU. The EU needs to be aware that this positioning of the V4 states might lead to a growing internal divergence concerning its Israel policy. This would especially hold true if it were to increase pressure on Israel, as some EU members envisage.

In a Joint Statement issued during the V4-Israel summit in Budapest in 2017, the V4 leaders "reaffirmed their support for a viable two-state solution and the right of Israel to live in security and peaceful co-existence with all its neighbours, including Palestinians". On the surface, this is in line with the EU's approach for solving the Arab-Israeli conflict through the creation of an independent Palestinian state. However, even though no V4 country has challenged the EU's position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, certain political actions and symbolic gestures (even if devoid of legal effect) indicate that the V4 are distancing themselves gradually from the EU's approach.

Differences between the V4 and the EU in Addressing the Middle East Conflict

For the EU, the Middle East conflict and its resolution are a central aspect of its relations with Israel. In this context, Israel is often criticised by EU officials for its policies towards Palestinians, especially with regard to the occupation and settlement policies in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, which are seen as obstacles to conflict resolution.

Political and legal steps to differentiate between settlements and Israel proper (the so-called differentiation policy) accompany EU criticism, e.g. the EU guideline regard-



ing Israeli activities in the occupied territories (2013) or the European Commission's "Interpretative Notice" on labelling goods originating from Israeli-occupied territories issued in 2015. Compared with this general EU approach, the V4 states are taking a differing stance. Examples include the rejection by the Czech and Hungarian parliaments in December 2015 of the labelling of Israeli settlement goods; the announcement of Czech President Milos Zeman to relocate the embassy to Jerusalem (which is opposed by Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis) in April 2018; and the successful blocking of a joint EU statement by Hungary and the Czech Republic (alongside Romania) that aimed to condemn the US embassy move to Jerusalem. In addition, the V4 governments have also frequently abstained from voting in the UN General Assembly or even voted against when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been reviewed.

The V4 states were not seeking an open conflict in Brussels about those differences, as the issue still is of a relatively low priority in the public discourse of the V4. Yet, the role of the EU within the Middle East Peace Process could be affected in that context: While a majority of EU member states discuss potential measures by the EU, including placing more pressure on Israel, the V4 governments rather aim to support Israel. This divergence is catalysed by the fact that the V4 states find themselves in disagreement with several issues at the EU level, which includes not only several foreign policy issues but also normative questions.

Security as a Normative Priority: Emerging Convergence between the V4 and Israel

The deviation of the V4 states from the EU's policy towards Israel takes place against the background of a discernible ideological rapprochement between these governments and Israeli leadership on issues of national security. There are many parallels in how the V4 and Israeli politicians define threats to national security as well as the necessary

means to defend fundamental values. Most of all, they share a sense of importance of the nation. Since the V4 have experienced Soviet domination, they tend to empathise with Israel's struggle for survival and security. Moreover, in the V4 states, the legacies of the Treaty of Trianon (1920), the Munich Agreement (1938), and the Yalta Conference (1945) have resulted in a shared narrative — that the existence of independent nation-states might not be a given fact, but rather that they are entities which continually need to be defended. This has prompted the Visegrád governments to adopt a politically realist approach — much like in Israel — that focusses on power relations rather than on norms and ideals when dealing with international conflicts. In this framework, the threat to national sovereignty or to the political and/or cultural survival of the nation is not merely seen as a problem of the past. Therefore liberalism, which emphasises the significance of the individual, human rights, and civil liberties, is often consciously portrayed as being inadequate, or even dangerous, in both Israel and the V4 whenever the nation is confronted with an existential threat — be it real or perceived. This particularly applies to Poland and Hungary. The quest for security has been an issue in these states for some time; however, since 2008/09 the scope of the process that can be called "securitisation" has been broadened. Governments in Israel and the V4 have successfully shifted the public discourse by framing several issues of public concern as being security-related problems. Migration, trade exchange, the judiciary system, limiting the leeway of political manoeuvring, and the allegedly excessively liberal media are examples of policy areas that are being "securitised". The results of this process are the ongoing consolidation and centralisation of power, a decline in the levels of pluralism, and shrinking spaces for civil society activities. For example, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been criticised both domestically and internationally for limiting fundamental freedoms, acting against civil society, and also for using anti-Semitic clichés and

stereotypes. A campaign against Hungarian-born, US-Jewish billionaire George Soros launched in Hungary since 2017 can be perceived as an example of this phenomenon. Soros is portrayed similarly by Israeli officials, namely as a danger to Israel due to his alleged support of immigration, and thus terrorism. The campaign in Hungary has been followed by legislation that provides the means of generally criminalising organisations “promoting illegal migration”. Still, the government’s argumentation that they simply aim to prevent Hungary from becoming destabilised through an increased influx of immigrants has been convincing, and even welcomed by the majority of the society (in April 2018 Orbán’s party, Fidesz, again won the election with 49.27% of the votes cast and a voter turnout rate of 70.22%). This trend is also reflected in surveys among V4 citizens, in which the biggest problems facing Europe today are named as terrorism (CZ: 20%, HU: 26%, PL: 18%, SK: 20%) and immigration control (CZ: 26%, HU: 18%, PL: 10%, SK: 12%). This suits the Israeli self-perception of being a besieged nation and in conflict with the “Arab” or “Muslim world”, respectively. Additionally, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is trying to convince the West that Israel’s enemies are also their enemies, and that migration is a potential threat to Europe. This is probably the strongest commonality between the V4 states and Israel. Especially the fear of unwanted migration and the perceived threat of terrorism (unambiguously associated with Islamist extremism) have led to a convergence between the governments of the V4 and Israel, resulting in an intensification of cooperation on security affairs.

But the far-reaching securitisation process within the V4 also has implications for the attitude towards the EU, which the V4 identify with having a predominance of left-liberal values. This attitude is perceived as being challenging — or even threatening — to the neoconservative vision pertaining to the security and welfare of the nation. In the light of these developments the V4 states are receptive to criticism of the EU presented

by Netanyahu, e.g. during the V4-Israel summit in Budapest in 2017, when he felt comfortable addressing the V4 leaders behind the curtains and saying: “The EU is undermining its security by undermining Israel [...] by a crazy attempt to create conditions.”

However, a limiting factor for cooperation are the differing views on the respective histories, especially the sensitive issue of the Second World War and the Holocaust. One example of this are the public debates in Israel about the legal amendment in Poland stating that making claims about Poland’s responsibility for Nazi German crimes would be punishable by law. This sparked a discussion in Israel, with claims being made that the authorities in Poland would be “whitewashing” their history. A similar controversy followed when Orbán praised Hungarian wartime leader and Nazi collaborator Miklos Horthy in a speech on 21 June 2017. Nevertheless, public criticism and dissatisfaction had little impact on relations at the intergovernmental level.

Economic Cooperation as a “Testing Ground” for a Closer Relationship

The political rapprochement between the V4 states and Israel has been accompanied by an increased willingness for economic cooperation. At the Budapest summit in 2017, the V4 states expressed their interest in cooperation in the field of innovation, research and development, and the transfer of Israeli technology, as well as energy cooperation. For the latter, there is a special focus on the opportunities offered by Israel’s natural gas reservoirs. Some V4 states — first and foremost Poland — view Europe’s dependency on Russian gas deliveries with great concern. In that view, Israel can help to diversify gas imports and decrease the EU’s dependency on Russia. Following the summit, two “working groups” were formed: one focussing on security and combating terrorism, a second dealing with research, development and innovations. Similarly, the “Memorandum of Understanding on

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Training Cooperation in the Field of Innovation” (signed on 18 June 2018) between the V4, Israel, and the International Visegrád Fund envisions short-term, intensive training programmes on best practices in the Israeli innovation ecosystem for selected entrepreneurs from V4 states. The desire to increase investment volumes and trade exchanges between the V4 and Israel has been frequently highlighted by the political leaders. However, the current trade exchange between the V4 and Israel remains at a relatively low level compared to the EU's total trade exchange with Israel. Nevertheless, the V4 states' business transactions with Israel are continuously growing. For both the V4 and Israel, mutual trade is a win-win situation: The V4 are looking for Israeli technological expertise and trade, and in return they can provide the cheap, yet qualified labour force that is needed by innovative Israeli industries.

Finally, the V4 states' officials have repeatedly expressed interest in Israeli security technologies, the purchase of Israeli weapons and equipment, as well as in trainings with the Israeli military. Examples of concluded deals are Poland's purchases of rockets and missile defence systems in 2016; cooperation between the Polish and Israeli aerospace industries on unmanned aircraft and electronic warfare systems in 2017; and in 2018 a partnership between the respective industries to develop light attack aircrafts. The context of the arms deals is remarkable, since it yet again diverges from Western European attitudes towards Israel. In accordance with the V4's national security and trade interests, Israeli security technology is perceived as contributing to global security. On the level of the European Union, however, security cooperation with Israel remains a contested issue. Therefore, economic interactions with Israel can be seen as a testing ground for a deepening and strengthening of general relations with Israel.

Conclusions and Perspectives

The growing closeness between the V4 and Israel is a new factor in EU policy concerning the Middle East Peace Process. Although the EU's position on the conflict has always been a result of compromises between the member states, the growing level of divergence within the EU limits its possibility even further to act through comprehensive incentives or pressure. In addition, the diverging positions are a gateway for interference and lobby activism by both parties to the conflict. On a general level, the V4 states are interested in preserving the EU consensus, which means upholding the two-state solution as the only mechanism for solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, the V4 governments are already wary of the steps being taken by the EU to pressure Israel. The differentiation policy is a case in point of this behaviour. Although the V4 support the policy in principle, they are not particularly eager to implement it. From a V4 perspective, it is most important to maintain and strengthen the existing “two-state solution consensus” within the EU instead of intensifying measures, for example curbing Israeli settlement construction, as suggested by some EU members. This stance is reinforced by the fact that those states which, in the V4 perspective, have been most critical of Israel – France and Sweden in particular – are also perceived as marginalising the V4 and their political views. Whereas the V4 states' relations with Israel cannot, of course, substitute for the political or economic European integration of the Visegrád Group's members, both their political closeness to Israel and a discerned marginalisation within the EU make it more likely that the V4 will deviate from the EU *acquis* regarding the Middle East Peace Process. Especially if the EU continues to increase its critical stance on Israel, the V4 may resist this trend.

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